

## Whisper or shout? The literary voice of Newcastle, New South Wales

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In his novel, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), Scottish writer Alasdair Gray challenges perceptions of Glasgow:

‘Glasgow is a magnificent city, said McAlpin. ‘Why do we never notice that?’

‘Because nobody imagines living there,’ said Thaw. ‘... think of Florence, Paris, London, New York .... Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he’s already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films ... What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. ... imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall and a few bad novels. That’s all we’ve given to the outside world. It’s all we’ve given ourselves.’ (217)

Gray suggests that in failing to offer their ‘magnificent city’ as more than ‘a music-hall and a few bad novels’, the people of Glasgow, particularly its creatives, are imaginatively disconnected from their *place*, and therefore deny their city not only to the wider world, but to themselves. Could the same observation be made of Newcastle, Australia’s largest industrial city? Newcastle, in the Hunter region of New South Wales, has a larger land area and smaller population than Glasgow and its region, but the cities are similarly trade ports that owe much of their growth to the export of coal, manufacturing and the working classes

that sustained those industries. Is Newcastle equally no more than the sum of its houses, workplaces, sports fields, pubs, the streets that connect them, and its industrial landscape?

This paper examines what can be learnt of Newcastle from its literary tradition, specifically its fiction, short story, memoir and industrial plays. How have writers of these genres imagined Newcastle from its indigenous and colonial past, through its industrial years, to its present iteration as the world's biggest coal port and a region growing in cultural complexity? What understanding of place, people, cultures and physical realities do these writers offer us, and why is it important for a region to have a literary voice?

How is this relevant to the Constellations theme? Literature is by its nature interdisciplinary, offering a range of perspectives including historical, social, cultural, geographic and economic. As our understanding of space and constellations is based on both established evidence and hypothetical construct, my research similarly examines what is already known in existing literature, and what can be discovered or freshly appraised in the field. A constellation has undefinable boundaries, being able to draw in matter and to disperse it to other realms: my project looks back into literature over time while aiming to add to future historic, social and literary understandings of Newcastle and the Hunter region as place.

David Marr briefly surveying Australian novels from convict times to the late 1990s ([australia.gov.au](http://australia.gov.au)), concludes with the observation, 'We keep reading our own fiction because when it's poor it's disappointing, but when it's good, nothing matters more ... We want voices: we want our own stories told.' While Marr fails to mention Newcastle writers, the Hunter has produced fictions that 'matter' from both regional and national perspectives. How do these, along with the broader literatures of memoir, memoir fiction and poetry, contribute to telling the story of Newcastle?

Marion Halligan witnesses Newcastle, the city of her childhood, in *Lovers' Knots: A hundred-year novel*, 1992, through numerous characters, including Veronica whose story somewhat reflects Halligan's life. After leaving Newcastle at the age of twenty-three Veronica, returning after the death of her parents, feels like a tourist and begins to understand the process of losing a city:

To grow up in a town is to learn it. While you're at work getting educated in and out of school, its maps, its shapes and landscapes and the intimate physical details that only lovers know become part of your mind ... The final orphaning ... hard enough to bear without losing her home town as well. By then she'd lived in Canberra longer than in Newcastle, and was fond of her new home, but not as of the place of her growing. (55-6)

To know a place by sight, sound, smell, taste and texture – prompts that adhere to memory – Halligan implies we must live that place. Living a place creates sensory, emotional and physical references that embed in our being. Such references become a metaphor for experience, helping filter our understanding of place. Kit Kelen, writing of the poetry of Macao in *City of Poets*, suggests that even for short-term visitors the city 'as metaphor is bi-directional, and reversible' and in order to disclose that metaphor we need to ask, what does the city represent, and in what ways is it represented? (31). How can the work of Newcastle's writers enhance our knowledge, and help us learn place more deeply and on a multiplicity of levels?

Newcastle has three distinct periods of literary output. The first began in 1797 with the invasion of indigenous lands by representatives of Sydney's new colonial government searching for escaped convicts (Pierce 80). The discovery of exportable coal and timber fast-

tracked the establishment of a penal colony, scaffolding the region's increasing pastoral and economic expansion through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Huge industrial expansion under the BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary) dominated the second era, 1911-1999, while the third period of contemporary writing is from 2000 to the present. Three key literary surveys provide an entry point to understanding the scope of the region's literature. These are several pages by Peter Pierce in the *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, 1993, and two essays: Julian Croft's 'A Sense of Industrial Place – The Literature of Newcastle, New South Wales', 1999, and Ed Wright's 'Fictions of Newcastle: Dusky Red With Industry', 2016. All discuss 19<sup>th</sup> century writers and two 20<sup>th</sup> century novels, Dymphna Cusack's *Southern Steel*, 1953, and Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect*, 1958. Pierce also mentions the playwright John O'Donoghue, and he and Croft give considerable space to the discussion of poets. Croft and Wright add Halligan's *Lovers' Knots* to the fictions list and Wright's essay, being more recent, surveys prose writers emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Newcastle writing: first era*

First, there were the eastern clans of the Wonnarua people. The Worimi lived north of the broad river they called Coquun while the Awabakal lived south of it, on coastal lands around the big lake they called Awaba. The city of Newcastle is rooted in this fertile, temperate region. The earliest literatures come from indigenous oral tradition, stories passed from generation to generation. Aboriginal stories generally related to moiety, morality, magic and stewardship of the land and waters that sustained the people. For the fidelity of memory, they were short, simple in the telling but often complex in meaning. In the mid-1800s, an Awabakal leader, Biraban, related some of his people's stories to Lancelot Edward Threlkeld, appointed by the London Missionary Society to establish their first Aboriginal mission in

New South Wales. Many indigenous stories spread throughout the diaspora, but the Newcastle-based Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre has archived stories specific to the region that explain landmarks and natural phenomenon. *Malangbula, The Petrified Women of Swansea Heads* tells of two women, turned to stone by an Awabakal warrior, who protect the nearby burial sites of their ancestors. *When the Moon Cried* explains the formation of Belmont Lagoon. *The Kangaroo that lives under Nobbys* is a men's-business story popularly believed to explain earthquakes in the region. *How Coal Was Made* gives this explanation for the extensive coal deposits of the Hunter region:

A long time ago a great darkness came over the land. The darkness came from a hole in a mountain and blocked out the sunlight. The people and animals were all very frightened ... The elders decided that they needed to cover up the darkness that was all over the ground. The men, women and children collected rocks, sand, branches and bark which they laid on the ground to cover up the thick darkness ... many generations walked on the ground pressing the earth flames and darkness together, which created coal or *nikin* in Awabakal. ([www.miromaa.org.au](http://www.miromaa.org.au))

The Australian limited canon of convict and colonial literature reflects both the small size and limited education of the colonial population. Many convicts, free settlers and even those serving in the military or lower echelons of the colonial administration came from unskilled backgrounds such as farming, mining and other industries. Most possessed rudimentary education, or none. This era's writing comprises mainly official reports and newspaper articles, or observations, impressions and recounts of events recorded in letters. The earliest written literature was memoir, reflected in early publications like George Bouchier Worgan's 1788 *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon*, convict artist Thomas Watling's

*Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay*, 1794 and the memoirs of James Hardy Vaux, 1819. Considering the limited literary output of those early times, Newcastle is reasonably well represented with accounts of the convict experience on the Hunter outlined in Vaux's memoirs, followed by James Tucker's rollicking, heavily fictionalised, autobiographic novel *Ralph Rashleigh* written in 1845 but not published until 1929.

From the convicts' perspective, and most likely that of their gaolers, the Newcastle penal colony was a hellhole. Vaux's memoirs record two incarcerations there, two miserable years of hard labour in the coal mine, and again, more bearably, serving his time as Store Clerk, during which he wrote his memoir plus his *Comprehensive Vocabulary Of The Flash Language*, commissioned as a translation tool for the court system. While Vaux's history of multiple convictions and escapes proves more vivid than his writing, James Tucker's novel *Ralph Rashleigh*, is a vivid tale of adventure and derring-do. The novel charts Rashleigh's life (and much of Tucker's) through childhood in London, transportation to New South Wales, the trials and adventures suffered there and his (Rashleigh's) eventual repatriation and noble death. Rashleigh's experiences include a period of incarceration at the Newcastle penal colony on the river he calls both the Coal and the Hunter. Tucker himself was never at Newcastle. Like Vaux, he was assigned as Store Clerk, but to Port Macquarie. There he would have heard stories from convicts relocated after the Newcastle penal colony closed in 1822. Tucker's second-hand account of Newcastle is realistic, vivid, robust and grim. The convicted endured a forty-eight-hour boat journey, stripped, jammed together in their own excrement and drenched by rough seas pouring in the hatches (217), landing at Coal River where they were assigned to work gangs. In the mines convicts man-handled 'waggons' filled with coal, supervised by a brutal overseer who 'with a stout cudgel dispensed his forcible favours so heartily that in a few seconds not one of the luckless gang belonging to the waggon in question was standing erect' (218). Much of Tucker's account focusses on the

overseers and 'the military commandant, a personage of stern and uncompromising severity, the absolute rigour of whose sway well merited the appellation bestowed upon him of "King of the Coal River"' (217). This was Commandant Morisset, portrayed as a particularly vicious man and ruthlessly satirised:

whether from depravity of taste or utter want of any feeling, no exhibition appeared to delight this modern Caligula so much as ... his Sabbath morning *amusement* ... No music appeared to delight his ears more exquisitely than the agonised yells of a wretched being who felt the lash for the first time. (226-7)

The worst punishment was joining the 'miserable beings' burning oyster shells for lime on the north (Stockton) side of the river. Naked except for a loincloth and in double leg-irons the men, 'all of them exiles and outcasts even from the horrors of Newcastle', were forced to carry the lime out to waiting boats where the overseer:

would compel the bleeding sufferers to place their baskets of lime upon their mangled backs and wade into the salt water with them until the agony of their wounds, with the mingled application of the briny fluid and the unslaked lime, became almost too poignant for humanity to endure; and several wretches, in Rashleigh's sojourn, actually drowned themselves in the sight of the commandant, who merely remarked, "It will save Government rope, and spare the hangman a job!". (227)

After many more horrors and 'atrocities ... of frequent occurrence' (229) Rashleigh's story becomes pure fiction. Escaping by boat, his six fellow convicts are whittled down by injury, confrontations with Aboriginal warriors, and their own viciousness. The sole survivor, he

lives with a tribe further north, learning their language and customs and taking two 'wives'.

Rescuing two women and a child from a wrecked ship eventually gains his freedom.

However, there was no romantic outcome for Tucker who, granted a ticket of leave after Port Macquarie was broken up in 1847, returned again and again into the penal system, eventually dying in his seventies in the Liverpool Asylum.

Tucker's depiction of the brutalities of convict life at Newcastle fits with official records and contemporary impressions of the hellishness of that penal colony. He also provides striking impressions of the geographies, landform, weather and deprivations of that place. Many convicts escaped from the penal colonies of Australia, and Rashleigh's sojourn with an Aboriginal family concurs with historical accounts of convicts being accepted by Worimi people around Port Stephens, north of Newcastle. In contrasting Rashleigh's harsh life as a prisoner with the humanity and respect accorded by his Aboriginal family, James Tucker constructs not only one of the earliest accounts of such experience, he also offers an accepting, even admiring, portrait of Aboriginal people at a time when the prevailing view considered them ignorant savages and murderers.

Tucker's depiction of Newcastle underscores the equivocal attitude of the convicts to authority, which is depicted as tyrannical but, to a certain extent, just (Rashleigh received good treatment amongst the bad and an eventual pardon), and the concept of the oppressed banding together against their oppressors for the common good is an emerging theme. A similar equivocality is later characterised by playwright John O'Donoghue and novelist Dymphna Cusack exploring worker/boss relationships, as Newcastle develops into Australia's most industrial city.

In taking his narrative beyond the oral traditions of the Worimi and Awabakal the reports and memoir of convicts and settlers, Tucker has created the first known fiction of Newcastle. Julian Croft sums up:



In the chapters of *Ralph Rashleigh* that deal with Newcastle, Tucker makes powerful use of the symbology of the underworld and mining, of the cruel, sadistic Commandant and his Satanic power, and of the absolute and total physical and spiritual degradation associated with both convictism and industrialization. Human society, civilization itself, is an instrument of torment, but for ... Tucker there is no solace to be gained from nature at Newcastle. The town is sand-blown and a collection of hovels. The northern shore a barren waste where the worst of the convicts are stripped naked and banished to burn lime. This is the world of the Gulag where consolation of any kind is denied. (16)

During the growth and expansion of the rest of the 1800s, the promise of Newcastle literature became suspended – apparently no other significant work was published. The lone literary voice comes from ‘The Vagabond’, journalist John Stanley James (1843-1896) writing as Julian Thomas. The Vagabond’s evocative reports became immensely popular due to James’ wit, irony, understatement and self-deprecation, and his empathy with the underdog, the homeless, the insane, the working and unemployed classes – perspectives rarely creatively portrayed, especially in a positive light. Employed by the Sydney Morning Herald, he reported on two trips to Newcastle in 1877 aboard the *Kembla* steamer (*The Vagabond Papers* 104 – 167). His article *In Newcastle* is mainly observational, offering visual images and impressions of Newcastle, its busy port and local characters. *In the Hunter Valley* makes acquaintance with Hexham’s mosquitoes, the Dalwood vineyards and the agricultural pasturelands around Maitland and Greta. James reports in detail in *Amongst the Colliers, On Strike and Down in a Coalmine*, on the lot of the region’s coal miners. Generally sympathetic to the plight of the families of men on strike he wrote, ‘I found, at last, that it

was a rule of the Union that no man should work on holidays or pay Saturdays; if he did, he would be fined 12s. 6d. This was another one of those absurd, arbitrary laws made by the Miners' Union. It appears the policy (sic) to keep the men as idle as possible' (157). James' observations underscored the struggle, alienation and problems with authority experienced by many workers, despite the region's increasing prosperity.

Hardship and the vicissitudes of fate are significant themes in the Hunter region's colonial literature. Landscape featured for its extremes and threats posed to survival, while socially the focus was the vulnerable and the victim, felons and workers rejecting the overwhelming power of authority while stoically submitting to it. Deprivation, depravity and drama were heightened in the interest of telling a good story.

#### *Newcastle writing: second era*

In Newcastle's second era, themes of family and upward social mobility began to emerge, and the divide between the haves and have nots, worker and authority came more clearly into focus.

Julian Croft claims that Newcastle, in 'not having grown from an older pre-industrial town ... is arguably one of the oldest purely industrial sites in the world'. Croft, Novocastrian born and educated, believes the region's literature is:

'atypical of the usual construction of Australian place', which is more commonly 'of the "wide brown land" pastoralism, Aboriginal Australia, and the anomie of the suburbs of the twentieth century. Industrial landscapes, and the communities that arose around those heavy industries, are not what most people think of when they imagine Australia'. (15)

From the first discovery of coal in the headlands of the Hunter River, Newcastle's industrial future was set. It became a major port shipping coal and other raw materials initially to Sydney, then to the world. When mining company BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary) chose to relocate from its remote inland base to the coast, proximity to the Hunter coalmines was a major drawcard. In his book, *Not Charted on Ordinary Maps: The Newcastle Steelworks Closure*, John Lewer notes BHP began establishing steel-production infrastructure alongside the Hunter River in 1911, with manufacturing commencing in 1915 (1). For the rest of the century the steelworks and associated industries dominated the landscape, air, economy and community. How did that domination reflect in the region's literature?

Ed Wright, in his essay, observes, 'With the exception of David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Glass Canoe* the industrial aspects of Australian culture have been relatively unexplored by its literature' (10). It is therefore noteworthy that Newcastle's John O'Donoghue contributed two plays – his nationally acclaimed *Essington Lewis: I am Work* and *A Happy and Holy Occasion* – to the Australian canon, while three Newcastle novels also engaged with the industrialisation of the BHP years. As industry is generally considered a male domain it is no small irony that those three novels are by women: Dymphna Cusack, Elizabeth Harrower and Marion Halligan.

Harrower and Halligan both grew up in Newcastle – Harrower for half of her childhood, Halligan for all of hers. Both use the omnipresent industrial landscape as context. *The Long Prospect* is the only one of Harrower's five novels set in Newcastle, which she calls Ballowra. Ballowra is a post-Depression city undergoing great industrial, commercial and population expansion: 'a moat of steelworks and factories surrounded (by) hills and plains of drab bungalows and shops. Cinemas, hotels, reared up from the encircled plain like small cathedrals. At night the sky glowed dusky red with industry' (9). Harrower's location is mostly the dreary suburbs of the aspirational working-to-lower middle-class, through which

grey and weary workers bicycle on their way to shift work, or where they loiter outside pubs on their days off. Against this backdrop, the long prospect becomes a motif of escape for three main characters: young Emily, who lives with her callous grandmother (Lilian Hulm), and Thea and Max, university graduates and outsiders to Newcastle who separately befriend the child. When Thea takes Max, her co-worker in the steelworks' chemistry laboratory, as a lover, she acquires the privacy and comparative luxury of a flat in the most modern block in Newcastle. This affronts her former landlady, Lilian, who considers the building pretentious: 'Since its birth Ballowra had been—you might say on principle—low-lying, single stories: in everything, that is, but steelworks and factories' (5). From Thea's windows, the long prospect of the sea is a trope not only for beauty, but for the unknown, the unpredictable, deeper understanding and escape. After Thea leaves Ballowra, Max also, boards with Lilian. His belief that further education is the *long prospect* that will provide young Emily keys to a better world proves to be his undoing. He is eventually driven away by the small-minded malice of Lilian and her cohort, and Emily's future remains uncertain.

Marion Halligan's multi-generational coming-of-age story *Lovers' Knots* explores Newcastle's character, with aspects of industry including the railway and tunnel mining infrastructure of Merewether, becoming obsolete as both city and novel progress through the century. While industry provides a physically and socially jarring context in Harrower's novel, Halligan's industrial city is a bit shabby and dusty, but a comfortably familiar setting for her main focus: the complexity of relationships through several generations. Halligan's Newcastle is ultimately a nurturing place, undaunting in population and physical size while neighbourhood locations and beaches support growth and independence. Croft observes that Halligan's novel, in moving away from Cusack and Harrower's 'dialectic of labor (sic) and capital, of good and evil, of historical necessity' looks 'forward to Newcastle's evolution in its third century' (20).

It is the earliest novel of these three, Cusack's *Southern Steel*, which comes to grips with Newcastle in a way that situates it as a true industrial novel. Biographer, Marilla North, in her essay *Dymphna Cusack and the Hunter, A Reciprocal Impact*, describes Cusack as a highly politicized, left leaning activist: a 1963 ASIO file notes 'little doubt she was a Communist' (n.p). Cusack, a regular visitor to Newcastle, spent 1942 and 1943 teaching first at Newcastle Girls High, then Newcastle Technical Boys High in Tighes Hill. Her play *Morning Sacrifice* emerged from this experience. When *Southern Steel* appeared, in 1953, she already had seven plays and four novels under her belt. Compared to Harrower's outer suburbs and Halligan's CBD and Merewether, Cusack's novel maps the old part of Newcastle below the Cathedral – the workers' cottages of Parnell Place overlooking Fort Scratchley and the industrial port. From *Southern Steel's* first page, Cusack opens the rich seam of working class solidarity and betrayal of family values that creates much of the novel's tension. Bar Sweetapple, a recently qualified engineer and aspiring Company man, flies home aboard a Company plane:

Seeing the whole city spread out below him, he was filled with a sense of exultation: the harbor sparkling ... the innumerable factory chimneys, and, towering above them all, sign and seal of Newcastle's existence, the smoke stacks of Southern Steel and Broken Hill Proprietary under their perpetual silver-black clouds. (3)

Bar's father, Hoppy, no longer employable due to a steelworks accident, has a more realist perspective. He sees 'the muddy channel of the river, over the crowded city to where the enormous stacks of Southern Steel and B.H.P. rose from the flat foreshores, belching forth smoke and steam in silver-white-lined clouds that drifted and lay in a grey pall over the whole city' (16). Hoppy's three sons provide a trope for change in community and

workplace. Landy, the youngest, represents the status quo – he has manual skills but is not ambitious and won't climb beyond his class. Rudd, the union man, symbolises division: in fighting for workers' rights he increasingly alienates the more conservative elements of workplace, community and family. Bar Sweetapple, the oldest son, is seen to have removed himself from his working class roots via a university education. His socially aspiring wife, Roz, strives to sever ties with family and friends she now considers common. As one of 'the bosses' Bar is viewed with distrust in the community. Even his family becomes unsure of him.

Cusack's novel vividly captures the people, working culture and dominant events and concerns of 1940s Newcastle. The steelworks dominate both physical and cultural landscapes while working class characters struggle to survive on limited means, maintain their jobs, improve their working conditions and cope with the threat lurking Japanese submarines pose to coastal shipping and their port city. War brings change, mostly resisted, particularly in the undermining of established sexual and social mores brought, in part, by American soldiers on R &R and the movement of women into men's jobs for the war effort. Both these aspects create a strong feminist theme in the book.

Kathryn Heyman's first novel *The Breaking*, published in England in 1997, just slips into the BHP era. Set in the semi-rural Lake Macquarie suburb of Boolaroo, the book has themes of small-town living and domestic violence which offer a broader appeal than purely local. Its relative indifference to the industrialised centre to the north flags a change of focus that will become increasingly evident in post-BHP literature.

Other prose publications of this second era are memoir based. *February Dark*, 1959, is Anne Von Bertouch's account of life on the Myall Lakes and *The Ride Home*, 1983, is her personal experience of Newcastle Hospital. Roslyn Taylor evokes a childhood in Stockton in *Your Hills are too High: An Australian Childhood*, 1986, and Harold Wells' *The*

*Earth Cries Out*, 1950, depicts mining life in the lower Hunter. Overall, Cusack, Harrower and Halligan are the writers who offer the century's key fiction, while John O'Donoghue provides the significant voice in theatre.

The Hunter region has sustained a strong focus on theatre and many productions have dealt with Newcastle-specific contexts and themes. Organisations like the Castanet Club, Hunter Valley Theatre Company, Playhouse Theatre and Tantrum Youth Arts have staged productions as various as *Mission Molly Morgan*, a satirical take on the convict era, and *Choice ladies from Molly Morgan to Joy Cummings*, a tribute to women of Newcastle. Nick Enright's 1992 play *A Property of the Clan*, based on the 1989 rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old girl at Stockton, examines aggressive bullying and misogyny in the teenage and police cultures. (Developed into a new production, *Black Rock*, 1995, it became a film of the same name in 1997.) Theatrical productions like this hold to the light history, events, individual identities, community issues and experience, class, the workplace and workers' rights, youth culture and movements such as feminism. They add not only to the region's literary voice but to the understanding Novocastrians have of themselves and their lives.

John O'Donoghue, born in Newcastle in 1929, wrote six plays, most with a working class focus. *A Happy and Holy Occasion* and *Essington Lewis: I Am Work*, are set against the background of the Newcastle steelworks industry. Introducing *A Happy and Holy Occasion*, Terence Clark writes, 'Under the humour and humanity the play has terrible things to say about the lives people in an industrial society are called upon to live; and about what, in yielding to its pressure, they can do to each other' (xiv). The 'Waratah-Mayfield' Catholic family central to the play is exploited by both workplace and church:

O’GORMAN: Tocky tells me he took eight salt tablets today.

DENNY: There was a desperate run on salt tablets over there today. I took five myself. I had rivers of sweat running off me. [*Laughing*] You should come over sometime, Father. It’d improve your sermons on hell.

O’GORMAN: Well, they say the initials of the company are well chosen: ‘B.H.P.’ ‘Bloody Hot Place’.

TOCKY: ‘Bloody Huge Profits’. (12)

O’Donoghue won the 1985 Sydney Critics' Circle Award for most significant contribution to theatre with *Essington Lewis: I am Work*. The play has been performed extensively around the nation. Ostensibly portraying Essington Lewis, the man credited with building the Australian steelworks industry, and the bosses and the workers who laid the foundations for the huge corporation, the play depicts the industrial cash cow that BHP became. The set is minimalist, brutal:

a high table and chair, and a large framework in the shape of a horse. The table represents positions of power ... The horse can be variously a literal horse, a position of authority, or, with the head removed, a blast furnace. At one point, ropes are set up to create a boxing ring representing the Arbitration Court. (4)

Lewis, whose credo is ‘I am work’, claims ‘No nation can aspire to greatness without a steel industry. Industrialization is the way of progress’ (36). His character juxtaposes against the archetypal worker, Taffy Williams. Taffy initially appears as an old man who has lost body parts to two world wars and the steelworks, before the play places him as a fourteen-year-old to whom Essington gives his first job, as a nipper (trainee). Taffy sings an



aspirational song, a distillation of the workers' hopes that hard work and luck will help them climb the ladder, just as Essington (assisted by wealth, education and privilege) has done. Considering the physical state that the audience already knows Taffy will be in by the end of his working life, dramatic irony packs a punch when Taffy sings 'I could become a foreman,/ Maybe even a boss', and 'I want a job above the ground,/ Where I'll be safe and sound' (40). Essington Lewis is the focus, but he is an 'outsider' and his progress to becoming the most powerful civilian in Australia is often surreal. Taffy Williams emerges as the more rounded and human character: his is the true voice of Newcastle.

Industrial Newcastle was a dangerous place. Between 1918 and BHP's departure in 1999, 274 deaths were recorded (Kirkwood) and severe injuries affected the ability of employees like Taffy to continue earning a living for their families. O'Donoghue's plays offer insights into the equivocal attitude of generations of Newcastle workers towards BHP, underscored by Melbourne-based Essington's meteoric trajectory of, who alternates through the play as the Boss who gives and the Boss who takes away. O'Donoghue also references frequent laying-offs and lock-outs of employees, reflecting of the worker/boss conflict which commenced with the convicts, became entrenched in miners' strikes for conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be exacerbated in the BHP years by the workers' perception of being exploited by the wealthy for shareholders and profit.

BHP's domination of Newcastle ended in 1999. The previous year, in the U.K, the University of Wales hosted a conference exploring industrial fictions. The outcome was the publication of *British Industrial Fictions* (2000). Editors H. Gustave Klaus and Stephen Knight suggest the papers published trace several themes. These include 'how writers responded imaginatively to the impact of industry on human lives in Britain, how they saw people coping with and resisting the demands made upon them, how they detected at once human waste and slumbering potential beneath so much degradation, how the dream of a

more just, healthier, more dignified life was never lost' (3). According to Klaus and Knight, 'a powerful attention to and valorization of work, a commitment to the importance of labour' (3) are key characteristics of industrial fictions. By this definition, Cusack's Newcastle novel and O'Donoghue's BHP play can be considered significant works in the canon of Australian industrial literature.

The worker/bosses divide is a key theme in Newcastle's second literary era. Social mobility is explored as an option, with education perceived as providing a route self-fulfillment, financial security or wealth, social standing and power. This era's literature reflects the rise of the middle class, and an element of nostalgia for things past.

#### *The current era of Newcastle writing*

Newcastle's post-BHP incarnation has seen a literary flowering. The city maintains its strong commitment to prose, theatre and poetry. The Newcastle Poetry Prize continues as one of Australia's richest, the Hunter Writer's Centre's Newcastle Short Story Award reflects a growing emphasis on short story and the Newcastle Writer's Festival, first held in 2013, has become a national fixture. Ed Wright claims in his essay that post millennial Newcastle represents 'middle Australia', a place with a rich performing and community arts scene that is 'hard to reconcile ... with the popular image of the city as a tough working class town' (15). Even so, he frames his discussion of two memoir fictions of this period, Michael Sala's *The Last Thread*, 2014, and Patrick Cullen's *What Came Between*, 2009, within the industrial context. He observes that, in 'using the point of view of a child', Sala 'minimises the impact of Newcastle as an industrial city' (24), while noting that Cullen's stories savour Newcastle's 'dignity and gritty ethos and the spirit of community that is the by-product of having been an industrial city' (27).

Cullen's short story cycle maps the reactions of four households in central Newcastle to the 1989 earthquake. Cracks appear and new directions open. The earthquake reminds elderly Elsie of her husband's death in a mine collapse: '... a shaft collapsed—they practically lived on top of that mine and the whole town felt it, the earth falling away beneath' (27). When Elsie begins to decline, her grandson Lucas comes to care for her, finding a new relationship and life. Re-visiting his lower-Hunter hometown, when a neighbour enquires, 'How is the big smoke?' Lucas responds 'Well, there is plenty of smoke—dust from the steelworks, really—but I don't think Newcastle really qualifies as the big smoke, does it?' (42). This sense of humility, realism and pragmatism, in defining the book's characters – who absorb the shocks and get on with things – also defines by implication the people of Newcastle.

Michael Sala's memoir fiction charts the journey of two boys, their mother and dysfunctional stepfather from Holland to Newcastle and back, and finally back again to Newcastle. The story of a physically and emotionally unsettled family is told by the often-confused but clear-eyed Michaelis, who tries to come to terms with the increasingly oppressive family situation in a city that slowly becomes less alien. His warts-and-all outsiders' view of Newcastle offers moments of great clarity, such as this description of the inner city, where the boys and their mother live in a terrace:

This part of the town has an older feel, a bit like Europe – the sprawling cathedral above the mall, the ruins of Fort Scratchley on the headland, with cannons that once fired on Japanese submarines. Near the remains of the fort is the break wall and above it the lighthouse. Back from this extend the narrow streets and century-old terraces ravaged by salt. Past that, hidden on the top of a hill, is the school where he first went as a boy six years ago, when he didn't know a word of English, walking with Mum

towards the sky through the corridor of figs. (109)

Sala also maps the earthquake: ‘... when I was fourteen, an earthquake hit Newcastle. Buildings collapsed all over the city, people died, the foundations cracked’ (119). There is a strong sense of the physical and sensory in his descriptions. The city is still industrial but that element recedes into background as more urgent awarenesses, like school, relationships and his mother’s health, occupy the growing Michaelis.

Other books of this era also map Newcastle’s permutations and locations. Julian Croft’s novel *Out of Print*, 2014, returns the reader to post war years: ‘Lunchtime in Bolton Street ... Late winter in an industrial town. It was not what high romance was made of’ (1). A racy tale of cold war intrigue, which cheekily reprises some of Elizabeth Harrower’s characters, Thea, Max, Lilian Hulm and an invented character from the Sweetapple family, the novel’s protagonist is Gladys, a journalist trying to shoulder her way in a man’s world. In his memoir/diary *A Year Down the Drain, Walking in Styx Creek*, 2011, Mark Maclean maps a year-long physical, observational and philosophical exploration of a waterway near his home –definitively a literature of place. Regional noir appears in several crime novels. Barry Maitland leads his readers into the dark side of Newcastle in *Ash Island*, 2015, the second book of his *Belltree* trilogy, while Jaye Ford features Merewether in *Already Dead*, and offers an unexpectedly dark exploration of peaceful haven Bay (Wangi Wangi) on Lake Macquarie, in *Blood Memory*. Numerous short stories in Ryan O’Neill’s *A Famine in Newcastle*, 2006, and *The Weight of a Human Heart*, 2012, contextualize the Newcastle region exploring, through the eyes and experience of a range of off-beat characters, numerous suburbs including Hamilton, The Hill, Nelson Bay, Bar Beach and, more obliquely, the Lower Hunter and Gloucester. The obsessive protagonist of *July the Firsts* observes of Newcastle, ‘I once wrote a history of Africa that took less research than this account of a small Australian city’

(*The Weight of a Human Heart*, 185). Other authors publishing fiction with a Newcastle context include Wendy James and Peter Corris, with new publications appearing from Michael Sala and Ryan O'Neill.

Memoir also plays an important part in exploring Newcastle and its environs from old and new perspectives. John Hughes' *The Idea of Home*, 2004, is a book of essays, part history, part memoir, part philosophy reflecting on his childhood in the lower Hunter Valley mining town of Cessnock, west of Newcastle. Hughes, like Sala, presents a migrant perspective – his Ukrainian grandparents, particularly his grandfather, manifesting a powerful influence on his self-understanding: 'I grew up in a small mining town in the coalfields of the Hunter Valley, in what was an exotic family, and I couldn't give a stuff' (5). Underlying Hughes' reflections is the landscape and mining culture of the Lower Hunter, 'old pit-heads like ancient ruins, the weatherboards, and greyhounds tied and muzzled' (85) and the 'seventeen collieries between Maitland and Cessnock' (82). His entry into academia, later becoming a teacher and writer, is at odds with his upbringing: 'The coalfields is a culture in which there resides a deep mistrust of words, that words at best fall short, and at worst betray anything that is of value' (109).

Newcastle provides a touchstone in numerous essays and articles by Mark Mordue, as a place to get away from and later to come back to, a place never far buried in the mind. In *About a dad* (Sydney Morning Herald March 29 2003) he describes watching his father 'walk into the giant steel mills of Newcastle, his smallness panging me with loneliness for him' and how his dad 'didn't want me to "end up" like him. As a working-class man, he saw education as a way of lifting me up and out of the struggles he felt condemned to'. In *Transistor* (Heat, 2006), Mordue reflects on himself as a 14 or 15 year-old 'boy in his bed in Newcastle, astral travelling via radio waves', and the growing urge to physically escape: 'deep down that I made Sydney up, that I invented it through songs I was receiving on the radio'. He develops

this theme further in *Lyrics to imaginary songs* (Griffith Review 23, 2009), writing of ‘finding new eyes for my world’ and how the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen ‘confirmed the possibility that my suburban life as a teenager, my here and now in the coastal steel town of Newcastle, was the stuff of poetry’.

Marion Halligan and Keri Glastonbury both published Newcastle-focussed memoir essays in 2007, offering insights into quite different periods of Newcastle. In *A Toast to Professor Appleton* Halligan evokes Newcastle in the 1950s, the decade that saw the publication of both Cusack’s and Harrower’s Newcastle-based books. In 1956, aged 16, Halligan entered ‘a new university on a creek-canal in a grotty industrial town by the sea, trying to educate a bunch of kids, clever enough but as shapeless and ignorant as the institution that had to be invented too’ (54). Fifty years later Keri Glastonbury writes of the dynamic of moving from city (Sydney) to regional centre (Newcastle) in her essay *Critical Animals* published in *Text*, citing the proliferation of DIY youth culture from zine making to festivals such as TINA (This Is Not Art). Glastonbury says, ‘I want to claim that regional cities make things happen that seem impossible in Sydney and other urban centres. Away from cultural epicentres, so the logic goes, you have to make your own culture. Even at a civic level, the arts are being embraced by post-industrial cities making themselves over as ‘creative cities’’ (3-4).

The literature of this era sees a focal shift away from the working class and subjugation to the bosses. While memoir-influenced writing sometimes exhibits elements of nostalgia, the past is generally viewed with more an appraising eye. The social threats and difficulties that present possess less of the omnipotence of the gaolers and bosses of the previous two eras. Opportunity and the resilience of individuals and community are explored while landscape and events like the earthquake become emblematic.

## *In Conclusion*

Newcastle's literature has had a slow evolution. Perhaps Julian Croft was right in suggesting in his *Antipodes* essay that 1800s Novocastrians 'must have been too busy making money or enjoying their slowly growing prosperity to spend much time writing. After the first flush of convict writing, life in a port or mining village seems not to have provoked the muse, apart from satires on local issues, or labored (sic) celebrations of national events' (17), although Croft's tongue-in-cheek observation doesn't account for minimal education levels of that era. What, then, explains the small output of significant literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Those who were educated *could* have written their region. By then it was well established and rapidly growing, no longer a place of poorly educated workers. At the height of BHP's influence, the industrial workforce included a vast range of qualified trades people, professional workers and managers, both female and male – and BHP was not, geographically, economically or culturally, the sum of Newcastle. The city was a hive of people employed in many fields of the arts, the education system was booming, the university was established, book clubs abounded. Did, then, the industrialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century create a reluctance to imagine Newcastle in literature? Perhaps there was a feeling that an industrial context is not a worthy setting for literature.

Despite BHP's departure, Newcastle with its port, manufacturing and coalmine dominated region, remains substantially industrial. Yet new writing suggests industry is less dominant as a literary concern. There is a sense of a more liveable, cultural, cosmopolitan and dynamic *place*, one no longer chained to its industrial past. There are also signs new writing, even in crime genres, is becoming less externally oriented and more introspective.

Why is it important, as Alistair Gray suggests of Glasgow at the start of this essay, that cities and regions are imagined in their arts, their literature? I believe we *do* want our

own stories told and a sense of place helps define us – both in the communal sense and in how the outside world perceives us. I am finding in Newcastle’s literature the strong voice of independence and empathy for the underdog that emerged in convict writings carries through the second era. It is seen in attitudes towards authority and bosses held by the workers, miners, steelworkers and unionists, artists, schoolchildren and everyday people. While this attitude is not unusual in Australia, it may reinforce for Novocastrians that their town was born of oppression. What attitudes will current era writings reveal?

Newcastle’s writers mine rich veins of humour, self-deprecation and self-satirizing. They depict a community with a strong sense of itself, tribes that condone or reject according to its own sense of right and wrong, identifying with the city’s distinctive places, like Nobbys, the break wall, Fort Scratchley, beaches with relics of the industrial past, and other landforms. While names of streets, roads, parks, buildings, landforms and geographical locations of a place often look backwards to the reason for their naming, events like World War 2 and the earthquake become touchstones for shared experience for Newcastle, filtering perceptions and understanding. Merged with the literary map, they will continue to feature in contemporary writing.

Newcastle, while supporting big industry, is not a big city. Pro rata it seems a fair showing that the region has produced two of Australia’s major works of industrial literature – *Southern Steel* and *Essington Lewis: I Am Work* – plus numerous other acclaimed works while sustaining a strong presence in theatre, poetry, publishing, prizes and literary festivals. As in any constellation there are more stars, depth and complexity, than can be appreciated from a cursory glance. It is not possible in this essay to provide a complete overview of the region’s literature and I am still too early in my research to determine the strength of the region’s literary voice but a case is developing to claim there is one. Keri Glastonbury



suggests Newcastle is a creative city. Are this city and its region still looking for writers to define them? Perhaps that has been happening all along.

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